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SUBJECT: Environment Minister Criticized as OECD Assessment
Approaches

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Outgoing Environment Minister Gideon Ezra was given a failing grade by the Israeli environmental NGO community in a review of his three year tenure. He sided with the government against policy choices endorsed by his own ministry staff, weakened rather than strengthened environmental protection legislation, and saw his ministry's budget cut to its lowest level in the past decade. This criticism coincided with a visiting OECD team evaluating Israel's handling of chemicals and its environmental preparedness for OECD accession, raising questions about Israel's compliance actions taken to date. Comment: Post believes the March and June OECD visits will be crucial in energizing the GOI to undertake needed environmental protection reforms. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Gideon Ezra received poor marks for his stewardship of the ministry and Israel's environment from local NGOs. They acknowledged that although his defense sector background gave him little in the way of background on environmental issues, he did study his new brief seriously and keep an open door. However, they term his tenure as one of lost opportunities and slow progress. Professor Alon Tal of Ben Gurion University claimed that Ezra's policies on air pollution failed, especially given the spotlight placed on this issue in recent years. Enforcement was poor, with factories polluting the Haifa Bay area escaping serious sanctions. "It is impossible to point to improvements... in air quality regarding harm to public health," said the head of the Israel Union for Environmental Defense. The minister's opposition to the Clean Air Act legislation, due to his budget constraints, appalled environmental defense groups. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) criticized Ezra for backing the GOI's settlement policy in the Negev and ecologically sensitive areas despite its sometimes deleterious environmental impact. It also faulted him for the Ministry's failure to pursue levies due the government for wastewater dumping in the Mediterranean - monies that were supposed to fund rehabilitation efforts along the shoreline. In brief, his critics claim that he failed to exercise the type of strong leadership that the sector needs.

¶3. (U) Ezra defended his record at an end-of-tenure press conference, and pointed to the accomplishments of recent years. Among those he mentioned were legislative measures levying new taxes on landfills, imposing tighter regulation on construction and demolition waste to curb illegal dumping, and regulating ground contamination. Although it will not take effect until 2011, Ezra also claimed that the Clean Air legislation was an achievement. He noted that he and his ministry worked to make government contracts more "green," thus capitalizing on the clout of government spending in the economy. As the Israeli military uses about 50 percent of

the country's land area, he termed as very important the recent efforts to increase the environmental awareness of IDF officers through new training programs. Ezra also cited new regulations tightening the import and export of hazardous materials and agreements to rehabilitate parts of Ramat Hovav, Israel's sole hazmat processing industrial park as significant accomplishments.

¶4. (SBU) The debate over environmental progress coincided uncomfortably with the start of a mission from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on March 15 to evaluate Israel's chemicals management. The delegation, headed by Rob Visser, Deputy Director of the Environment Directorate of the OECD, came in the context of Israel's accession process to the OECD. It will assess Israel's willingness and ability to implement OECD-recommended standards related to chemicals. These standards include transparency in the chemicals management system and requirements on the reduction of risks to humans and the environment as a result of the production, use, and disposal of chemicals, including preparedness for both industrial and defense-related hazardous substances accidents. Within the framework of its accession process, Israel submitted its Initial Memorandum to the OECD in July 2008. The memorandum specified the extent of Israel's acceptance of the obligations resulting from each of the OECD's relevant legal instruments and the compatibility of Israeli legislation and policies with these obligations.

¶5. (SBU) During the visit, members of the Chemicals Mission will hold discussions with representatives of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labor and others to hear about Israel's preparations for fulfilling OECD chemicals management requirements. Key among the subjects to be discussed are the establishment of a chemicals licencing and control mechanism, the assimilation of integrated pollution prevention and

control (IPPC) principles in industrial plants, and the establishment of a pollutant release and transfer register (PRTR). Gaps in Israeli policy will be clarified. Besides talking with the GOI, the OECD team will meet representatives of the Israel Manufacturers' Association and environmental NGOs. Following the meetings OECD officials will tour several of Israel's hazmat hotspot sites, including Ramat Hovav.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Post believes that the present OECD team visit will play a critical role in laying out to the GOI the reforms needed to smooth the route to accession vis-a-vis the environmental criteria. Their scheduled return visit in June to evaluate progress - just prior to a Paris meeting on the accession - will help focus the new Israeli government on the issue. The degree to which Israel's new government undertakes the necessary reforms will test the depth of its commitment to the OECD process and the strength and political savvy of the new environment minister as s/he takes over what is considered to be one of the most junior ministries in the cabinet.

Cunningham